India, WI make winning starts in U-19 World Cup

BULAWAYO: India and the West Indies made victorious starts to their respective U-19 World Cup campaigns as two matches survived the weather on the opening day on Thursday.

India recovered from 25-3 to beat the USA by six wickets (DLS method) while the West Indies overcame debutants Tanzania by five wickets.

Zimbabwe's clash with Scotland was washed out in Harare.

India survived a scare to run out six-wicket (DLS method) winners over the USA in a rain-affected clash in Bulawayo. Henil Patel was in fine form with the ball, taking 5-16 from seven overs to help India seize early control.

Nitish Sudini impressed for the USA, hitting four boundaries in his 36 having arrived at the crease with his side 39 for five. Sudini was the last man out as the USA were dismissed for 107 in the 36th over.

India lost Vaibhav Sooryavanshi in the third over of the reply, clean bowled by a jubilant Ritvik Appidi, before the players were taken from the field due to lightning in the area with India 21-1.

They returned with a revised target of 96 from 37 overs and quickly slipped to 25-3, Vedant Trivedi cutting straight to point before captain Ayush Mhatre (19) picked out fine leg.

But Abhigyan Kundu and Vihaan Malhotra (18) added 45 for the fourth wicket to steady the innings and Kundu continued to an unbeaten 42 to see the five-time winners home, sealing the win with a huge straight six in the 18th over.

Tanzania's first-ever match at the U-19 World Cup ended in defeat as the West Indies ran out as five-wicket winners in Windhoek.

The African nation batted first and made a steady start, Dylan Thakrar (26) and Darpan Jobanputra (19) posted 53 for the first wicket before both fell in the space of five deliveries.

Wickets then fell at regular intervals, Vitel Lawes claimed (3-23) and Micah McKenzie (2-15) and Shaquan Belle (2-23) chipping in with two apiece as the middle order failed to fire.

Tanzania slipped to 86 for seven and though Acrey Pascal (10) and Khalidy Amiri (12) pushed them into three figures, the innings was wrapped up on 122 with 16 overs unused.

The West Indies lost Zachary Carter early in reply, the first of two scalps for Agustino Mwamele (2-17), but Tanez Francis (52) and Jewel Andrew (44) added 80 for the second wicket to take the batting side to within touching distance.

Both fell before the job was done as the Windies had a wobble, Raymond Francis (2-23) also took two wickets, but Shamar Apple hit the winning boundary from the final ball of the 21st over.

Co-hosts Zimbabwe were left kicking their heels alongside Scotland in Harare as rain caused an abandonment without a ball being bowled.

Zimbabwe are next in action against England on January 18, with Scotland taking on Pakistan on January 19.—Agencies

Afghanistan approve three-foreign-league annual cap for top players

KABUL: Top Afghanistan players such as Rashid Khan can play a maximum of three franchise leagues abroad per year, alongside mandatory availability for a rebooted domestic competition, according to a new policy approved by the Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB).

The decision was taken at the board's annual general meeting in Kabul on Wednesday "to protect player fitness and mental well-being," the ACB said in a statement.

"This measure aims to manage workload and ensure peak performance for national duties," it added.

All players should be available for the five-team Afghanistan Premier League slated to launch around October 2026 in the United Arab Emirates.

Star all-rounder Rashid plays franchise cricket in India, the UAE, the United States, South Africa and England.

His team-mates Noor Ahmad, Mujeeb Ur Rahman, Rahmanullah Gurbaz and teenager AM Ghazanfar also play in multiple leagues across the world.

Similar caps exist elsewhere. Pakistan restricts centrally contracted players to two overseas leagues outside the Pakistan Super League, while India does not allow its contracted male players to participate in any league abroad.—Reuters

NONTHABURI (Thailand): Pakistan captain Kayanat Bokhari heads the ball during the SAFF Women's Futsal Championship match against Sri Lanka at the Nonthaburi Stadium on Thursday. Azwa Chaudhry scored twice as Pakistan won 3-2 for their first win of the tournament. Pakistan, who drew 1-1 with Bhutan in their opener, next face the Maldives on Saturday. —Courtesy SAFF

THE Dacia Sandriders's Qatari driver Nasser Al-Attiyah and Belgian co-pilot Fabian Lurquin compete during the 11th stage of the Dakar Rally, from Bisha to Al Henakiyah, on Thursday.—AFP

Ekstrom wins Dakar stage 11, Al-Attiyah stays on top

AL HENAKIYAH: Nasser Al-Attiyah remained on course for a sixth career Dakar Rally win in the top car category after last year's runner-up Henk Lategan hit more trouble in the Saudi Arabian desert on Thursday.

The Qatari, driving for the Dacia Sandriders, finished the stage with an eight minute and 40 second lead over closest rival Nani Roma in a factory Ford.

The 13-stage rally ends on Saturday at Yanbu on the kingdom's Red Sea coast.

"Tomorrow, we just need to do the same as today. If we lose two, three or four minutes its no problem. We just need to finish this Dakar in first place," said Al-Attiyah.

Ford's Mattias Ekstrom won Thursday's 346km stage from Bisha to Al Henakiyah, the Swede's third stage win of this year's event.

Al-Attiyah had started the day 12 minutes clear of Lategan, who had slipped back after two nightmare days of mechanical misfortune and navigational errors.

On Tuesday, the South African had to drive with no power steering and no windscreen, on Wednesday he got lost and ran out of fuel and on Thursday he broke the bearing on his rear left wheel and dropped to 23rd.

"We saw Lategan stop and were sorry for him — it's never nice to see someone who is fighting but has a mechanical issue but it's part of this game," said Roma.

Nine-time world rally champion Sebastien Loeb was third overall, but 18 minutes and 37 seconds behind his leading team-mate, with Ekstrom fourth.

"I really pushed. I think Nani was at a very high pace as well so its going to be hard to take time back from him," commented Loeb.

Ekstrom's team-mate and four-time Dakar winner Carlos Sainz was third on the stage and fifth overall.

In the motorcycle category, reigning champion Daniel Sanders continued despite a broken collarbone but the Australian has dropped out of contention.

American Ricky Brabec relinquished the lead for strategic reasons, the Honda rider and double champion seeking a better start position for Friday's key stage, with Argentina's Luciano Benavides taking over at the top for KTM.

Benavides is 23 seconds clear but will be at a disadvantage in starting Friday ahead of Brabec.

"There's only really one day more left to push... I just did a little bit of strategy today and hopefully it pays off tomorrow," said Brabec.

American Skyler Howes won the stage ahead of French Honda team-mate Adrien Van Beveren. Benavides was fourth and Brabec sixth.—Reuters

India-origin Bajwa to lead Canada in T20 World Cup

TORONTO: India-born Dilpreet Bajwa will lead Canada at the Twenty20 World Cup next month, the country's cricket board said on Wednesday as it announced a 15-member squad for the competition.

Bajwa, 22, who has featured in nine ODIs and 17 T20Is, will make his debut as captain at the global showpiece, which will be co-hosted by India and Sri Lanka from February 7 to March 8.

Canada, making their second appearance at the tournament, are in Group 'D' alongside South Africa, New Zealand, Afghanistan, and the United Arab Emirates.

Their campaign opens against South Africa on February 9 in Ahmedabad, with all their group-stage matches set to be played in India.

Bajwa, who has four half-centuries and a strike rate of 133.22 in Twenty20 Internationals, will be seen alongside power-hitter Yuvraj Samra, former captain Saad Bin Zafar, Dilon Heyliger, Nicholas Kirton and Navneet Dhaliwal among others in the squad.

Canada secured their spot in the tournament by winning all six of their matches in the Americas Regional Final.

In their previous World Cup appearance, Canada finished fourth in their group, with a single win over Ireland.

Squad: Dilpreet Bajwa (captain), Ajayveer Hundal, Ansh Patel, Dilon Heyliger, Harsh Thaker, Jaskarandeep Buttar, Kaleem Sana, Kanwarpal Tathgur, Navneet Dhaliwal, Nicholas Kirton, Ravinderpal Singh, Saad Bin Zafar, Shivam Sharma, Shreyas Movva, Yuvraj Samra.—Reuters

President's Trophy fourth round starts

By Our Sports Reporter

KARACHI: The fourth round of the President's Trophy began in Karachi on Thursday with four matches underway at the KCCA Stadium, SBP Sports Complex, NBP Sports Complex and UBL Sports Complex.

At the KCCA Stadium, Sahir Associates reached 245-8 in 92.1 overs against Oil and Gas Development Company Limited (OGDCL), recovering from an early wobble thanks to half-centuries from Mohammad Faiq and Asim Ali Nasir.

Reduced to 32-2, the pair added 97 runs for the third wicket. Faiq fell seven runs short of his maiden first-class century, scoring 93 off 188 balls with seven fours, while Asim made 59 off 115 deliveries, striking five boundaries, to also move to the top of the tournament's run-scoring charts.

OGDCL's Asif Afridi claimed his 18th five-wicket haul in first-class cricket, finishing with figures of 5-72 off 33.1 overs.

Mohammad Saleem remained unbeaten on 40 off 131 balls, while Razaullah contributed 29.

At the SBP Sports Complex, State Bank of Pakistan were bundled out for 106 in 38.2 overs by Khan Research Laboratories (KRL). Mohammad Hamza (4-17), Ahmed Bashir (3-39) and Abdul Wahid (3-49) shared the wickets.

Muhammad Ghazi Ghori top-scored for SBP with a 62-ball 40, while Kashif Bhatti (16) and Niaz Khan (11) were the only other batters to reach double figures.

In reply, KRL closed the day on 135-3 in 38 overs, with Waqar Ahmed unbeaten on 57 off 87 balls and Imran Rafiq not out on 25. Saad Baig made 29 at the top of the order. Rameez Aziz took two wickets for 26.

At the NBP Sports Complex, Sui Northern Gas Pipelines Limited's Shehzad Gul continued his impressive run, taking 4-40 to help dismiss Pakistan Television for 166 in 66.2 overs.

In reply, SNGPL were 58-3 in 18 overs after slipping from 23 without loss. Omair Bin Yousuf remained unbeaten on 26 off 28 balls, while Mohammad Ali survived 18 deliveries for four runs as nightwatchman.

At the UBL Sports Complex, Ghani Glass were bowled out for 142 in 46.4 overs against Wapda, with Ali Razzaq top-scoring with an unbeaten 64 off 108 balls, which included nine fours and two sixes. Tayyab Tahir added 33.

For Wapda, Naqeebullah took three wickets, while Mujtaba Khan, Khalid Usman and Mohammad Zeeshan claimed two apiece.

Wapda closed the day on 129-4 in 33 overs, trailing by 13 runs, with Ayaz Tasawar unbeaten on 42. Muhammad Akhlaq scored 38 at the top of the order before Sharoon Siraj fell late to Khurram Shahzad.

BCB official sacked over derogatory remarks against players

DHAKA: The Bangladesh Cricket Board was forced to sack its finance committee chairman Najmul Islam after senior players of the national team revolted against him for making derogatory comments against them, the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency reported on Thursday.

Toss was delayed in Thursday's Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) game between Naokhali Express and Chattogram Royals here after neither of the two teams showed up at the venue and players of both teams were unified in their demand for immediate removal of Najmul.

Under player and public pressure, BCB was forced to act and removed Najmul as chairman of the board's finance committee. It is unclear if he remains a BCB director.

"The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) wishes to inform that, following a review of recent developments and in the best interest of the organisation, the BCB president has decided to release Mr Najmul Islam from his responsibilities as Chairman of Finance Committee with immediate effect," said BCB in a statement. "Until further notice, the BCB president will assume the role of Acting Chairman of Finance Committee. BCB reiterates that the interests of the cricketers remain its highest priority. The board remains fully committed to upholding the honour and dignity of all players under its jurisdiction," it added.

The furore started after Najmul, while reiterating Bangladesh's refusal to travel to India for next month's T20 World Cup on account of "security worries", rejected concerns surrounding players' remuneration should the country withdraw.

He stated that the players would not be compensated as they have not justified the support so far, having failed to win a single ICC event. The statement caused an outrage with Cricketers Welfare Association of Bangladesh (CWAB) calling for his immediate ouster from BCB. BCB had also showcaused Najmul.

"BCB reiterates its regret over the recent objectionable comments made by a member of the board.

"BCB acknowledges the concern caused by the remarks and wishes to reaffirm its commitment to professionalism, respect for cricketers and the values that nurture the game of cricket," BCB stated in a press release earlier on Thursday.

"...the board has already initiated formal disciplinary proceedings against the board member concerned. A showcause letter has been issued, and the individual has been instructed to submit a written response within 48 hours," it added.

Bangladesh are refusing to tour India, citing security concerns after pacer Mustafizur Rahman was dropped from the IPL on BCCI's instructions for unspecified "developments all around".

BCB is still in talks with ICC to figure a way out after the world body showed reluctance to shift Bangladesh's four games in India to Sri Lanka.

Najmul had earlier described former captain Tamim Iqbal as an "agent of India" after he called for a restrained handling of the standoff with India, warning that decisions taken today would have impact 10 years down the line.

CWAB had condemned that statement from Najmul.

Bangladesh Test captain Najmul Hossain Shanto has also urged for a pragmatic approach and also revealed that the players are under immense stress due to the current circumstances.

"We have been discussing with BCB for many issues but didn't get any solution. We are now hopeless. Cricketers are playing the game for pride. We told him to say sorry but he became more desperate. He can't make such comment.

"They are taking long time to solve women's team matters. Without evidence, nine players were omitted from BPL for alleged corruption in BPL." —Agencies

Sinner to face Gaston in Australian Open first round

MELBOURNE: Defending champion Jannik Sinner will meet French world number 94 Hugo Gaston in the first round of the Australian Open in his bid for a third straight title at Melbourne Park, while women's top seed Aryna Sabalenka takes on French wildcard Tiantsoa Rakotomanga.

Men's top seed Carlos Alcaraz will play 79th-ranked Australian Adam Walton in the Spaniard's quest for a first Australian Open crown to become the youngest man to complete the career Grand Slam.

At the draw ceremony at Melbourne Park on Thursday, 10-times champion Novak Djokovic, the fourth seed, was bracketed next to 71st-ranked Spaniard Pedro Martinez for the opening round of the Grand Slam starting on Sunday.

Serb Djokovic, who is gunning for an all-time record 25th Grand Slam title to break clear of a tie with Margaret Court, could face rising Italian Lorenzo Musetti, the fifth seed, in the quarter-finals before a possible semi-final against Sinner.

Italian Sinner has a smooth first week but fans will hope it includes a third round match-up with 28th-seeded Brazilian Joao Fonseca should the exciting, 19-year-old talent prove fit following recent back problems.

The draw is very difficult, it doesn't matter who you play," said Sinner at the draw ceremony. "We are the best players in the world and the way is very, very long."

Alcaraz has home hero Alex de Minaur in his quarter of the draw but the Australian sixth seed must pass a tricky first test against Italian Matteo Berrettini, the Wimbledon runner-up in 2021.

Twice champion Sabalenka has few threats in her quarter of the draw before a potential semi-final against third seed Coco Gauff, who opens against 55th-ranked Uzbek Kamilla Rakhimova.

Women's second seed Iga Swiatek will meet a qualifier in the first round but her path to a first Australian Open title and seventh Grand Slam crown overall could mean a crunch quarter-final against the resurgent Kazakh Elena Rybakina.

Former Wimbledon champion Rybakina, the fifth seed, looms as a dangerous proposition after clinching her maiden WTA Finals trophy in November in a major return to form.

Rybakina meets unseeded Slovene Kaja Juvan in the first round.

Defending champion Madison Keys will face unseeded Ukrainian Oleksandra Oliynykova but the American ninth seed has a tough road to the title.

Keys could meet sixth-seeded compatriot Jessica Pegula in the fourth round before a potential quarter-final against another American in fourth seed Amanda Anisimova.

Home favourite Thanasi Kokkinakis, who had a protected ranking for the Australian Open due to injury, pulled out of the men's draw on Thursday after suffering a shoulder injury at the Adelaide International.—Reuters

ITALY'S Jannik Sinner hits a shot during a practice session on Thursday.—AFP